

Elisa Lorelo has written eight novels, a memoir, and a writing craft book. Her latest novel, *Big Skye Littleton*, is set in her adopted home of Billings.

PHOTO BY CASEY PAGE



# Romancing Montana

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELISA LORELLO  
BY KRIS KING

**E**LISA LORELLO, like the heroine of her latest novel, moved to Montana for love. Unlike the bewildered heroine of her latest novel, Lorello arrived as an already accomplished bestselling author with more than 10 years of experience teaching college rhetoric and writing.

*Big Skye Littleton* could be described as a coming-of-age-before-middle age novel that meets contemporary romance. Skye Littleton, masking insecurity with jocular-ity, moves to Montana to be with a new love but is jilted before her plane lands.

Her journey of self-discovery includes putting down new roots, mending old bridges, finding her professional calling and ultimately true love—self-love followed by romantic love. The warm story is full of down-to-earth characters and reflects Montana’s charms as seen through fresh eyes. “She had yet to see a Billings skyscape that wasn’t postcard-perfect, a newly painted mural every hour.”

Lorello is a writing instructor, blogger, author of *The Writer’s Habit* and a memoir in addition to eight novels she characterizes as “romance rhetoric.” She became a full-time novelist in 2012 and has sold over half a million books worldwide. A Long Island, New York, native and the youngest of seven children, she moved to Billings in 2016.

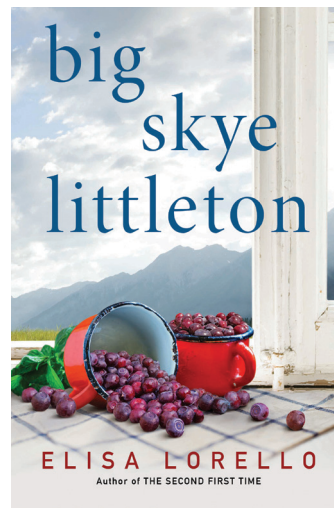
Lorello shares a home and business, Lancarello Enterprises, with her husband, author Craig Lancaster, and is mother to an adopted cat and stepmother to two dachshunds.

*Montana Quarterly*: What do you want people to know going into *Big Skye Littleton*?

*Elisa Lorello*: I want people to give Skye a chance. In the beginning, she’s acting a bit rash and perhaps even irresponsibly. Don’t be so quick to judge her. If you see what’s behind the behavior, you’ll see that she wasn’t valued as a child, and she’s learning to transcend that.

## BIG SKYE LITTLETON

By Elisa Lorello | Lake Union Publishing, softcover,  
270 pages, \$14.95



*MQ*: What was it like to base this novel in your new hometown of Billings?

*EL*: It was fun! And it made me feel more deeply connected to where I live now.

*MQ*: Has teaching rhetoric and composition affected your writing?

*EL*: Definitely. I approach writing novels from a rhetorical perspective rather

than a literary one. I defined rhetoric for my students as the art and skill of using language to communicate and/or persuade. I access the rhetorical situation—purpose, audience, stance, style, and genre—rather than mapping out plot or crafting around themes or traditional literary tropes.

*MQ*: How do writing nonfiction and fiction differ for you?

*EL*: Fiction and nonfiction (novels and memoir in this context) both aim to tell a story as well as a truth. The difference is that in fiction, the “lie” is the conduit to that truth, and it’s usually not as explicit as nonfiction.

In terms of process, I think nonfiction, especially memoir, takes a little more out of me emotionally. I worry about the cost of publishing something that reveals personal things about me and/or people close to me. But in the end, it’s not really about me but something much bigger.

*MQ*: Has moving to Montana affected your writing?

*EL*: My experiences have broadened quite a bit since

**“I think relationships in general are all a little absurd because of the baggage we bring to them, and that opens the door to making them comical.”**

moving here, and that affects my writing. Memory and experience drive my writing as much as imagination does—that’s not to say that my novels are autobiographical, but rather that I repurpose what I witness or take part in.

And Montana has this mesmerizing effect on me. I still can’t get over the vastness of it all. That’s going to play out somehow in future novels. I just don’t know what form it will take.

*MQ:* What was the genesis of this novel?

*EL:* Like Skye, I had begun a long-distance relationship with someone who lived in Billings. However, I wasn’t sure I was willing to make such a drastic move. . . . Hence, I spent a summer in Billings “test-driving” the relationship and seeing if Montana was a place I could live day to day. I was immediately embraced by a community of friends and artists, and was wowed by the natural beauty, especially the sky.

I wanted to turn my experience on its head, however; thus, Skye is much more impetuous, and she arrives in Billings to find complete rejection and failure.

*MQ:* Did you have a specific audience in mind while writing this novel?

*EL:* I think I always have my friends in mind when I’m in the drafting stage. I’ve made so many new friends since moving to Billings, so I figured they’d get a kick out of it, but I also wanted my longtime friends to enjoy it too and get a glimpse of where I live now.

*MQ:* Do your character’s personal challenges and solutions spring from the storyline or the characters themselves?

*EL:* A little of both. All my novels begin with a what-if—what if a woman gives up everything and moves across the country to be with the love of her life, only to be ghosted by him when she gets there? There has to be an intention and an obstacle. Once they act (or react), then I’m really interested in what’s behind the behavior. Why was she so impulsive? Why does he push her buttons?

*MQ:* How do you deal with many people assuming

your fiction is autobiographical?

*EL:* I have to smile and politely tell them it’s not me. In some ways, it’s a compliment that I’ve managed to achieve an authenticity that feels real to them.

That said, there’s almost always something autobiographical that I’ve repurposed. I do need to start with a point of connection, but ultimately, it’s the protagonist’s story and truth.

*MQ:* What role does humor and quippy dialogue play in your novels?

*EL:* A big one. I love writing dialogue. It’s so wonderfully rhetorical because of its ability to argue, communicate, persuade, etc., plus it’s a great way to get to know the characters and advance the story without relying on too much exposition.

Additionally, I think relationships in general are all a little absurd because of the baggage we bring to them, and that opens the door to making them comical.

*MQ:* Has being married to an author changed your writing process?

*EL:* The nice thing is that I can share my successes and struggles with the process and he totally gets it. But I don’t really share my drafts with him unless it’s a scene or chapter I am proud of or need his help with. He doesn’t read the work in its entirety until it’s published. In fact, it’s a lovely ritual we have—I will read my book to him, a few chapters a night before bed, and I get to see his reactions as I’m reading to him. Same thing when he publishes a novel.

The biggest challenge has been adjusting to a new routine. I was single for a very long time, and had been quite content to make my writing the sun around which everything else revolved. I’m way more acclimated now, but I still find I’m more productive when my husband is away and I kind of slip back into single mode.

*MQ:* Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

*EL:* Learn your craft. You’d be surprised how many aspiring writers/authors try to do an end-run around it. Read as much as you can and write as much as you can. Learn the business, too. 📖